

All Jacked Up

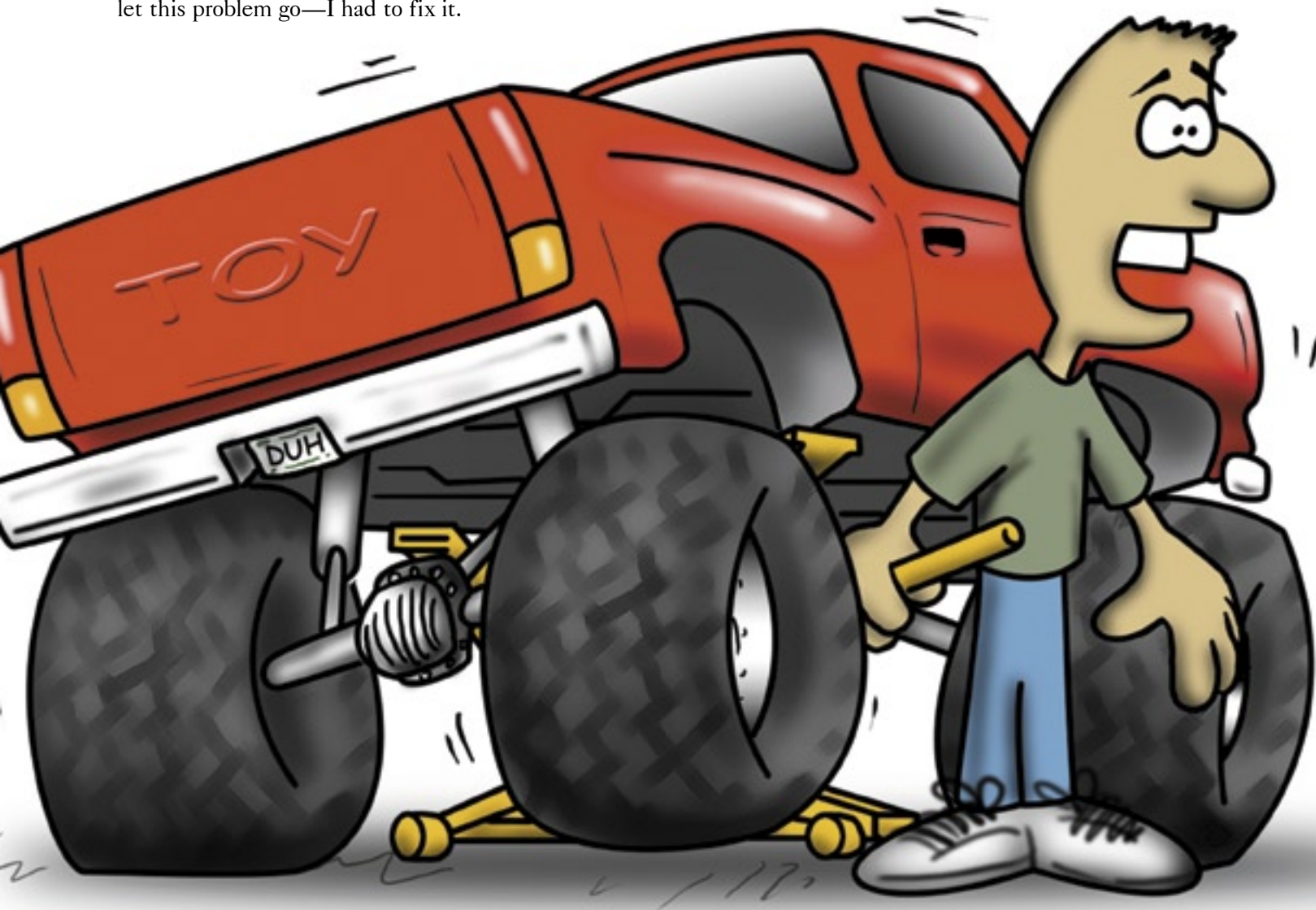
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Recreational activities often are in the mind of the beholder. I find that doing routine maintenance, and sometimes not-so-routine maintenance, on my 14-year-old pickup can be one of my most enjoyable recreational activities.

My truck is nothing special to most people, but, to me, it is a source of constant pride. You can imagine the heartache it caused me to drive around with a broken lug nut on the right, rear wheel. I just couldn't let this problem go—I had to fix it.

Besides, I have this really cool floor jack that was aching to be used. It was the kind you see NASCAR pit crews sling around so effortlessly. How hard could it be to lift a truck and repair a broken lug? On TV, it looks like a two-minute job. I'm here to tell you that those harmless-looking floor jacks can be one of the most dangerous tools in your garage.

My job started well. After I had chocked the front wheels, lifted the truck, and removed the wheel,



it took only about a half-hour to figure out how to remove the broken lug and replace it with a new one. I don't consider myself slow—just meticulous. I didn't want to do the job so fast my neighbors would miss the sight of me with a floor jack and dirty hands, doing my own maintenance. Besides, half the fun is letting all the guys come over and tell me the right way to do the job.

The one thing nobody noticed was my precarious positioning of the floor jack under the axle and the fact the jack handle was close to the frame rail. When I got tired of showing off and had finished checking out all the various parts, replacing the wheel, and snugging down the lugs, it was time to twist the floor-jack handle and let the pickup return to the ground. Here is where things went wrong for me.

I was so focused on the actual jack point on the axle and making sure the truck was clear of all obsta-

cles when I eased it
back down that
I didn't notice
the position

of my right hand. It was on top of the jack handle, directly under the frame rail. As I slowly released the pressure from the jack, the frame rail settled on my right thumb, which was clamped firmly around the jack handle. The 3,500-pound truck trapped my thumb like a mouse in a trap. I didn't feel the pain as much as I did the instant embarrassment.

I quickly called out to my wife, who came to see what kind of a mess I had gotten myself into this time. Together, we lifted the truck enough so I could pull out my thumb. It took only one look to know my wife needed to take me to an emergency room—my thumb was a crushed mess. Unfortunately, her car was parked in front of my now-half-jacked truck, so she couldn't help me. I was able to convince my neighbor to take me to the hospital. The on-call doctor bandaged up my thumb until I could see a hand surgeon the next day.

I don't need to cover the details of the two surgeries and subsequent therapy I had. Suffice it to say I was able to keep my thumb, and I nearly have full mobility with it. Here are lessons I learned from this experience:

- Floor jacks inherently are dangerous! They quickly can lift heavy objects but can lull an unsuspecting mechanic into a sense of complacency.
- Always use jack stands with floor jacks.

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- Always chock the correct wheels when lifting your vehicle. Lift your vehicle on a level surface.
- When lowering your vehicle, take the time to clear all tools—and body parts—that may be in the path.
- Read the jack's operating instructions and make sure it's working right.

I'm sure a professional mechanic could add some important tips to this list, and you'd probably be smart to see one before using a floor jack. I was lucky—the Navy ensured I had the best medical treatment available, and I was able to keep my thumb. Some people aren't so lucky—I've heard about a few who died in floor-jack mishaps. ■

The author was assigned to VAW-117 when he wrote this story.

